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The Spy Photos Reagan Didn't Show

The black-and-white aerial pictures displayed in President Reagan's televised plea for more defense money gave viewers a peek at only a fraction of America's photographic evidence of expanding Soviet military activity.

The archives of U.S. intelligence teem with classified photos taken from satellites and high-flying jets that show, close up and in color, far more startling details of Russian weaponry from Siberia and South Yemen to Angola and Nicaragua.

Lawmakers and journalists have seen some of these classified pictures. But at the urging of intelligence advisers, Reagan gave his March 23 television audience photos no sharper than those that could have been taken a quarter of a century ago. Said the President: "I wish I could show you more without compromising our most sensitive intelligence sources and methods."

Reagan offered pictures of Soviet-built planes in Cuba and Nicaragua and a 10,000-foot runway that he said "the Cubans, with Soviet financing and backing," are building on the Caribbean island of Grenada. All of these photos were similar in quality to those taken of the Soviet Union in the 1950s by U-2 spy planes and those exhibited by President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Airplanes are still used for some reconnaissance missions, but most of

America's photographic intelligence now is gathered by satellites. Security advisers prevailed on the Chief Executive not to show any of the military's photos from space.

The latest space cameras use multi-spectral color to penetrate camouflage. The results are flashed back to earth electronically. Heat-sensitive cameras can tell whether a silo contains a missile. They can even reveal whether petroleum storage tanks are full—a vital tip-off to plans for an attack.

It was not until 1978 that a President even acknowledged the existence of such cameras. The Soviets learned numerous details of U.S. satellite spying through their own espionage. Other collection secrets were disclosed when pictures taken from space were left behind in the tangle of aircraft wrecked in the abortive 1980 attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran.

Those pictures, taken from 100 miles above the ground, enabled U.S. analysts to distinguish one ayatollah from another by the shapes of their beards. □

Photos of Communist activity were not America's best.

